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Ag thriving despite loss of farm acres

Revenue growth remains strong as California growers switch to types of crops that use less land

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While there is growing concern about the loss of agricultural land to urban sprawl, the farming industry itself is doing very well, according to Don Villarejo, executive director of the California Institute for Rural Studies based in Davis.

That, despite the loss of some of the most productive land in the world here in the Central Valley.

``Ag is doing splendidly," Villarejo says. ``We had $24 1/2 billion in farm cash receipts in '96 in California."

To put that in perspective, that's three times the worldwide box office receipts of the motion picture industry, he says. And that's 10 percent bigger than '95.

``In real terms, for the last 10 years, California agriculture's annual average rate of growth has been twice the rate of growth of the U.S. economy," Villarejo adds.

What's happening in California is the result of a long-term transformation from wheat and cattle, for instance, to more intensive crops, like fruits and vegetables, experts agree.

According to University of California public policy specialist Al Sokolow of Davis, farmland was lost to development in the Central Valley -- an 18 county-region stretching from Redding to Bakersfield -- at a rate of about 15,000 acres a year between the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s.

``That's a conservative estimate," Sokolow says.

The total loss -- beyond that lost to urban sprawl -- is much more, Sokolow adds.

He estimates the total farmland taken out of production annually in the Central Valley is more like 87,000 acres, or 0.8 percent of the valley's total supply. So less than one-quarter of what's lost is directly due to the paving over of farmland with houses and stores.

Most of the rest of the loss is due to the creation of wetland and habitat preserves, while some is due to an indirect effect of urban sprawl and people leaving the farming business, he adds.

But urbanization has a greater impact on the best, most productive farmland because of where cities are located -- on the valley floor on the best soils.

``It's the land that makes the Central Valley the cornucopia that it is," Sokolow says.

The most productive land, irrigated land, is decreasing at a more rapid rate than nonirrigated land, at 1.2 percent a year, he says. This land produces the highest value crops, such as tree crops, vines and vegetables.

``If the same trend continues, you start to run into really serious problems," Sokolow says.

Producing more on less

But Villarejo, who 20 years ago founded the California Institute for Rural Studies -- a nonprofit research institute -- emphasizes that now more is produced on less.

``What's really going on is a transformation of our agriculture from extensive agriculture, with pasture and field crops and grain, to a different kind of agriculture, one that is producing primarily fruits, vegetables and tree nuts," Villarejo says.

If Sokolow's figures are correct, over the last four years, 60,000 farm acres were lost to urbanization. But in almonds alone, there were 140,000 acres in new plantings in the last four years, according to Villarejo.

And 27,000 new acres of wine grapes were planted in the Central Valley last year, he adds.

The transformation is occurring because people are eating differently -- more fresh fruits and vegetables, he says.

People in the United States eat about 25 percent more fresh fruit per capita than they did 20 years ago, he says. In the case of some fresh vegetables, some people are eating 50 percent more than they did.

And for some crops, it's way up. For example, strawberries are up 300 percent over 20 years, he added.

Extensive crops that are more land- and equipment-intensive, like barley, are being replaced by labor-intensive crops that take up less space, such as strawberries.

``We're a net gainer right now. Not in terms of the land area, but in terms of the production, in terms of dollars," Villarejo says.

California can still come out ahead in terms of production even if a lot of land is taken out of farming and put it into intensive crops, while still more land is given up to urbanization, he says.

``What most people don't get is that 80 percent of the land in the valley is in extensive crops and only 20 percent is in these intensive crops," he adds.

The shift is happening, according to Villarejo, in response to world markets.

Hong Kong, for instance, is now the No. 3 destination for California table grapes, ahead of many other U.S. markets, Villarejo says.

``This year we had table grapes, 600,000 crates, going to Vietnam. It's just amazing."

Sokolow agrees that production is not being hurt by the decline in ag acres -- at least for now.

At the same time acreage is taken out of production, there is a steady increase in the market value of the commodities produced on the remaining acreage.

``Much of that is due to the changeover from low-value to higher-value crops," Sokolow says.

In some places in the valley, range land has been converted to orchards or vineyards. And land once used for wheat is now producing vegetables in other areas.

The market value of Central Valley agriculture has steadily increased, Sokolow says. From 1985 to 1995, for example, it went up from $9.2 billion to $15 billion at an average annual increase of 3 percent a year.

Small farms on the rise

For years, the California Institute for Rural Studies has been focused on agricultural labor and protecting small farms. Although it seems the small farm has been threatened, new small farms are cropping up, Villarejo says.

``Interestingly enough, there are a lot of small farms starting up in California, but they're a different kind of farms than the ones that have been lost to the conversion of ag land to development," he says.

Most often they are intensive crop farms, such as the strawberry farmer, a Cambodian refugee, whose crop was popular last spring on Covell Boulevard in West Davis.

Up and down Central California, there are thousands of these new, small-scale intensive farms.

In Fresno County there are 700 Southeast Asian-owned small farms that have started up in the last 10 years. That's 10 percent of the farms in the county, he says.

Sokolow agrees that while the trend nationwide has been toward fewer small farms, the trend recently in California has been toward more small, more large, and fewer medium-sized farms in terms of acreage.

Long-term threat?

Sokolow still believes that despite the fact that production is up, if the current trend continues, a long-term problem will result.

``Right now, on an annual basis it's less serious. Less than half of 1 percent is converted to urban from ag in the Central Valley per year," he says. ``But you start adding that up, in 20 years, 30 years, if the same rate continues, it certainly becomes a serious problem."

What could happen as a result, he says, is the food supply could offer less variety and added nutritional value.

Although Villarejo says the issue Sokolow raises is a real concern, he is optimistic.

``For the foreseeable future, as far as we can tell there will be more land to put into" crops like orchards and vegetables, Villarejo says.

Much of people's concerns have to do with their identification with the past, with farms as communities, with land use issues and with the environment, Villarejo adds.

Erik Vink, American Farmland Trust's state field director, applauds the fact that California is producing more food on less land.

``California agriculture will continue to adapt and will change the mix of crops it grows, much as we've seen in the last decade," Vink says.

But he says it's no reason not to protect California's most valuable ag lands. As California loses more of these acres with unique soils and climate availability -- ``whether it's to environmental purposes as envisioned under CALFED or to urbanization" -- we can't grow foods, Vink says.

``I don't think that should be any excuse not to redouble our efforts to protect the most valuable land, because your best most productive land will always be able to produce more."

And Vink points out that the population is growing. California's population is expected to double by the year 2040, while the Central Valley's is expected to triple.

``We need to think about what it is we can do without gouging a huge wound into the long-term ag base," Vink warns.

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